IN CHARGE
November 9, 2008

JOHN M. BUCHANAN
FOURTH PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH

Psalm 72:1–4, 12–19
Joshua 24:1–3a, 14–15
Matthew 25:14–30

"You have been trustworthy in a few things,
I will put you in charge of many things."
Matthew 25:21 (NRSV)

With the currents of history threatening
to carry before them everything we have loved,
trusted, looked to for pleasure and support,
we are called to live with enormous insecurity.
The churches could be centers of creative and
courageous thinking. They could also
become sanctuaries for frightened Americans,
recruiting grounds for authoritarian figures
and movements. . . . Will we be scared to death
or brought to life? It all depends on where we find
our ultimate security. Will it be in our own fear
and guilt or in God Almighty? . . .
If it's hell to be guilty, it's certainly scarier
to be responsible, able to respond
to God's visionary creative love.

William Sloane Coffin
The Courage to Love

Whatever you think of the outcome of Tuesday's presidential election, it was a remarkable event, a defining moment in our nation's history and its long journey toward liberty and justice for all. A woman vice presidential candidate and an African American presidential candidate: not so very long ago, neither could have voted, let alone run for office. All around the world people responded to Barack Obama's victory with joy and hope—Indonesia, Ghana, Nigeria, Paris, Rome, and, of course, Kenya. Not for years has it been evident that the world still wants and needs American leadership. That alone is reason for gratitude this morning.

The world also saw our democratic political system doing what it does best: giving a voice to a diversity of opinions and positions on a multitude of serious issues confronting us—the economy, the war on terror, health care, taxation. It saw two parties and their candidates presenting ideas, debating, and critiquing each other. And in spite of the occasional silliness, deliberate misrepresentation and exaggeration, and occasional meanness, it saw the people going to the polls—all of us—voting, expressing our convictions and hopes for the future and our love for this country. Then amazingly, wonderfully, by midevening there was a winner, the people's choice, and a concession speech that was a model of graciousness and honor and a pledge to support the new president. That, too, is reason for gratitude this morning.

We have come a long way. As I watched the proceedings in Grant Park, I was proud of Chicago, my city, proud of my nation, proud of Barack and Michelle Obama and Malia and Sasha, proud of what we have done finally.

As I watched, I remembered my first exposure in divinity school, in Hyde Park, to the notion that religious faith and racial justice have something to do with one another, that to be a disciple of Jesus is to feel deeply the pain of injustice, name it, speak about it, become responsible for it, do something about it. In the middle of it all, the great theologian Reinhold Niebuhr said that the civil rights movement just might save the institutional church from irrelevance. It was true for me. The issue of race opened for me the whole Calvinist/Reformed/Presbyterian notion that following Jesus Christ happens not just in church, but in the world; that Christian faith expresses itself in the marketplace and polling place, courtroom and boardroom.

As I watched the first family-elect walk out onto the blue stage in Grant Park, I remembered the courageous saints who went before: Martin Luther King Jr., Andrew Young, Jesse Jackson, John Lewis; thousands and thousands of young people, church people, laity, and clergy who marched, protested, demonstrated; the Stated Clerk of the Presbyterian Church, Eugene Carson Blake, who participated in a protest at a segregated amusement park, was arrested, and whose picture, wearing a clerical collar and stepping into a paddy wagon infuriated some Presbyterians, including my father, and inspired others, including me.

Psalm 72, which we read this morning, is about new leadership—in ancient Israel, the enthronement of a new king. Its focus is the responsibility of leadership—righteousness, justice, and peace—and it is clear that nations are accountable to the Creator for the way they treat the weakest and most vulnerable, the poor and oppressed. And then the psalm offers a prayer for the leader's health and welfare and safety: "Long may he live!"

And so this morning, let us pause in this worship service to pray.

Lord of all nations and all people, we give you thanks this morning for our nation, for its democratic processes and institutions, for its long struggle to extend and assure liberty and justice to all. We thank you for the commitment of men and women who run for office, for the sacrifices they make and the long hours and days and weeks and months they give. We thank you for Senator McCain, and we ask you to bless him. We thank you for President-Elect Barack Obama, and we ask you to bless and keep him now and in the days ahead. We thank you for the renewal of hope he has inspired, here and throughout the world. In the busy days ahead, give him a sure sense of your peace and justice and your gracious presence in his life, through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

. . .

In his new best seller, *Hot, Flat, and Crowded*, Thomas Friedman writes,

> Our young people are so much more idealistic than we deserve them to be, and our broader public, though beaten down at times, is still eager to be enlisted—enlisted to fix education, enlisted to research renewable energy, enlisted to repair our infrastructure, enlisted to help others. You can see it in the number of college graduates lining up to join Teach for America. They want our country to matter again. . . . I would go through a gauntlet of five metal detectors every time I flew out of Washington, D.C., if I thought there was some great project, worthy of America, on the other side—not just the War on Terrorism. . . . We need America, and the world needs America to be something more that the "United States of Fighting Terrorism." Yes, we must never forget who our enemies are, but we must also remember who we are. (p. 13)

Throughout the book, Friedman returns to the relationship between fear and responsibility, how fear paralyzes, prevents us from doing what needs to be done, prevents us from taking any risks at all. His point is that our fear of terrorism has become an obsession, that we are neglecting to deal with the issues of oil dependence and renewable energy and in the process making ourselves less safe than ever. Fear doesn't take risks—ever. Fear prevents us from doing what needs to be done.

It is the subject of a story Jesus told one time, near the end of his ministry, when he was increasingly sure that he would be gone soon and his disciples would be alone, in charge of the enterprise—without him. His story is prescient. A man, the owner of an estate, is about to go on a journey. He summons three of his slaves, or servants, and gives each of them a portion of the business to manage. To the first servant he gives five talents. (A talent is a substantial sum of money.) The man traded, invested, bought low, sold high, and doubled his money. To the second servant, the owner gives

two talents, and the man does the same thing: invests and doubles his money. Both take significant risks. Both exercise stewardship—management of the resources given to them—by investing at some risk. When the owner returns, he praises both and rewards them not monetarily, but with more responsibility, puts them in charge of more resources, give them more jobs to do. And they are invited in to enjoy the company of the owner.

The third servant is cautious. Someone noted recently that we can't hear this story today without thinking about the stock market. If we have invested funds or if we are in any way responsible for an institutional endowment, we have less money today than we did a few weeks ago. And if we had followed the example of the third slave in this story and buried our talents, we might seem like financial geniuses today (Andrew Warner in the *Christian Century*, 4 November 2008).

The third servant is a prudent man. He knows his master is a tough businessman and will not be happy if his money is lost, say in a bad investment in Jericho Olive Oil Futures (Warner).

So he digs a hole and buries the money. This is not a bad man. There is no hint of dishonesty, deceit, fraud. He hasn't done anything wrong. He's not very creative, but he's solid. And when his master returns, he produces and presents the well-preserved one talent with pride. But in a dramatic turn that I imagine shocked his disciples, Jesus says that this prudent, solid citizen is "worthless." He's stripped of everything he has and unceremoniously thrown out of the household.

What do we make of this? New Testament scholar Charles Cousar says the message here is responsible stewardship, management of one's own resources, one's own life and faith. The problem here, he says, is that "prudence and wariness become self-protectiveness and restraint. Inhibition turns to fear." The man "deems it better to preserve his own safety and security than to run the risk of losing money and angering his master."

That's no way to follow me, Jesus was telling his disciples. That's no way to live your life: holding back, avoiding risks, living in a constant state of fear. The teller of this story, Jesus himself, knows about risk taking, knows that love always entails risk. If you want to save your heart from breaking, C. S. Lewis once said, don't give it to anyone or anything. If you want to save your heart from breaking, don't give it to anyone; bury it. What, after all, is more risky than marriage or any commitment to a personal, as-long-as-life-lasts relationship? What could be more risky than having children, investing eighteen, nineteen, twenty or more years without any idea how it's going to turn out? What could be more risky than running for office, investing everything you have—time, energy, faith, resources—with the distinct possibility of failure?

William Sloane Coffin once suggested that paralyzing fear is the central problem of the church.
Coffin himself was a risk taker, investing himself totally in important and controversial issues: racial justice, gender justice, war, peace. He wrote, in what feels like both autobiography and a commentary on our text,

> While love seeks truth, fear seeks safety. And fear distorts the truth not by exaggerating the ills of the world, but by underestimating our ability to deal with them. It's the protective strategy of deliberate failure. . . . You can't lose any money if you don't place any bets; you can't fall out of bed if you sleep on the floor. (*Courage to Love*, p. 13)

The challenge of responsibility is on the first page of the Bible. God creates a man and woman— whose names, by the way, mean "everyone"—places them in a garden and gives them dominion, responsibility to manage the place, name the plants and animals, and become responsible for the entire project. And on the second page of the Bible, the original human failure, the original sin, has nothing to do with sex but is an abdication of personal responsibility. The snake persuades Eve to eat the apple, Eve persuades Adam. When they are caught, Adam blames Eve, and Eve blames the snake. No one is responsible.

Do you remember the television comedian Flip Wilson? His weekly show was always funny. I loved it. It was not politically correct. One of the great moments was when Wilson, cross-dressed as Geraldine, tottering on high heels, wearing a short, tight dress, lots of cheap jewelry, flamboyant, not at all concerned about conventional morality, always on the edge of impropriety—and often over the edge—did something outrageous, was caught, and then looked into the camera and explained, "The devil made me do it!" The audience loved it, but underneath it was an entirely biblical analysis of the human condition. God has placed us here to be responsible managers, but we abdicate responsibility, and when things go wrong, as they inevitably do, we blame someone else.

The issues here are important: global warming and the environment, for instance. The scientific community is virtually unanimous that human consumption and dependence on fossil fuels is an important factor in environmental deterioration and global warming. And still we refuse to be responsible. A Roman Catholic theologian who thinks about the theological implications of the environmental crisis recently said, bluntly, "We live in a carefully protected and continually reinforced collective delusion"—that it isn't really happening and, if it is, it's not our fault.

Dietrich Bonhoeffer said that the sin of respectable people is running from responsibility. Bonhoeffer's life and academic career were cut short when

he assumed personal responsibility for what was happening to his beloved nation, returned to Germany, joined the resistance, was arrested and executed. His major academic work is a classic on ethics, and the heart of his ethical theology is the idea of responsibility. Bonhoeffer concluded that to believe in Jesus and follow Jesus is to become a responsible citizen.

Thomas Friedman observed the idealism of America's young people, their eagerness to be enlisted to some great project, summoned not just to nation building in Iraq and Afghanistan but to do nation building in America, to restore and revitalize something they cherish but feel is being degraded.

Friedman recalls a tour of Iraq last year with Admiral William Fallon, at the time the Chief of the Central Command. They visited an American field hospital in Balad, in central Iraq. "The full madness that is Iraq was on full display," he said. "U.S. soldiers with shrapnel wounds from suicide bombers, insurgents with gunshots to the stomach, a bandaged two-month-old baby girl with wounds from an insurgent planted I.E.D. . . . Admiral Fallon chatted with the hospital staff who were there on overlapping rotations—30 days, 60 days, 180 days. He asked how they [managed it all]. A voice from the back, a nurse, piped up: 'We're all on the same team, sir.'"

"I looked around the room. I saw African Americans, Hispanic Americans, Asian Americans, Caucasian Americans—the whole melting pot that is America—working together. Half were women, including mothers who had left behind their families and kids for six months or a year to serve in Iraq.

"I walked away shaking my head, thinking, 'What have we done to deserve such good people?'"

Whatever you think about what our nation is doing in Iraq, there is something of personal responsibility in those young people that moves me deeply.

God has made us responsible for creation, for the world, for life in the world, for every living thing.

God has made us responsible for human society, for its institutions; for this nation, for the future of the gospel, the life of this church.

John Calvin said, "Let this, therefore, be our rule for generosity and beneficence: we are the stewards of everything."

God has made us responsible for ourselves. You may not always feel like it, but you are in charge of your own life—you, and no one else is in charge.

And in Jesus Christ, God calls you to live that life fully, passionately, responsibly, taking the inevitable risks of love.

In Jesus Christ, God came down to be among us, became human, vulnerable, took the risk that human beings would not notice him, would not care, would reject and crucify him. Jesus himself was the ultimate risk taker, after all, putting the whole project in the hands of the twelve and now in your hands and mine, making it our responsibility and, at the end of the day, our greatest privilege and joy.

“Well done, good and faithful servant. You have been trustworthy in a few things. I will put you in charge of many things.”

Enter into the joy of your master.

Amen.